

## Food Allergy Guidelines

A true *food allergy* happens when an individual's immune system overreacts to an ordinarily harmless food. This is caused by an allergic antibody call IgE (Immunoglobulin E), which is found in people with allergies.

*Food intolerance* is sometimes confused with food allergy. Food intolerance refers to an abnormal physical response to a food or food additive that is not an allergic reaction. It differs from an allergy in that it does not involve the immune system (for example: Lactose Intolerance).

*Food allergens* are the parts of foods that cause allergic reactions and are usually proteins. The most common food allergens, which are responsible for 90% of all allergic reactions, are the proteins in cow's milk, eggs, peanuts, wheat, soy, fish, shellfish, and tree nuts. In some food groups, especially tree nuts and seafood, an allergy to one member of a food family may result in the person being allergic to all the members of the same group. This is known as *cross-reactivity*. However, some people may be allergic to both peanuts and walnuts, which are from different food families; these allergies are called *coincidental allergies*, because they are not related.

Some children, as they grow older may tolerate foods that previously caused allergic reactions, with the exception of peanut and tree nut allergies. Periodic food allergy check-ups with appropriate food challenges should be carried out under the supervision of an allergist.

Symptoms of allergic reactions to foods:

The most common allergic skin reaction to a food is *hives*, hives are red, very itchy, swollen areas of the skin that may arise suddenly and leave quickly. *Atopic dermatitis*, or *eczema*, as kin condition characterized by itchy, scaly, red skin, can be triggered by food allergy.

Symptoms of *Asthma*, a chronic condition characterized by narrowed airways and difficulty in breathing, may be triggered by food allergy, especially in infants and children.

*Gastrointestinal symptoms* of food allergy include vomiting, diarrhea and abdominal cramping, and sometimes a red rash around the mouth, itching and swelling of the mouth and throat, nausea, abdominal pain, swelling of the stomach and gas.

Severe allergic reactions:

In severe cases, consuming a food to which one is allergic can cause a life-threatening reaction called *anaphylaxis*. Anaphylaxis is a systemic allergic reaction that can be severe and sometimes fatal. The first signs of anaphylaxis may be a feeling of warmth, flushing, tingling in the mouth or a red, itchy rash. Other symptoms may include feelings of light-headedness, shortness of breath, severe sneezing, anxiety, stomach or uterine cramps, and/or vomiting and diarrhea. In severe cases, patients may experience a drop in blood pressure that results in a loss of consciousness and shock. Without immediate treatment, anaphylaxis may cause death.

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Symptoms of anaphylaxis are reversed by treatment with injectable *epinephrine*, antihistamines, and other emergency measures. It is essential that anyone with symptoms suggesting possible anaphylaxis get emergency treatment immediately.

## Diagnosis:

An allergist is the most qualified professional to diagnose food allergy. Diagnosis requires a carefully organized and detailed assessment of the problem. A thorough medical history will be taken, followed by a physician examination. Information will be taken regarding the frequency, seasonality, severity, nature of the symptoms and the amount of time that elapses between eating a food and any reaction.

*Allergy skin tests* may be helpful to determine which foods, if any are triggering a patient's allergic symptoms. In skin testing, a small amount of liquid extract made from the food is placed on the back or arm. If the patient develops a wheal (a raised bump or small hive) this positive response indicates a possible allergy. If the patient does not develop a wheal, the test is negative. It is uncommon for someone with a negative skin test to have a Mediated-mediated food allergy.

Your allergist may also use blood tests, called *RAST testing*, to diagnose food allergies. In certain cases such as severe eczema all over the body, an allergy skin test cannot be done. Your doctor may recommend a food RAST blood test to obtain the same information that can be found with a skin test.

The doctor may suggest that the patient keep a *food diary*, a detailed record of listing food eaten, date, time, and any symptoms that occurred after eating the food. When an allergy to a single food is suspected the allergist may recommend elimination of the food for a time.

## Treatment:

1. Avoid the offending food- The best way to treat food allergies is to avoid the specific foods that trigger the allergy.
2. As about ingredients- To avoid eating a "hidden" food allergen away from home, food-allergic individuals must always inquire about ingredients when eating at restaurants or others' homes.
3. Read food labels- It is important for food-allergic people to read food labels carefully and to become familiar with technical or scientific names for foods.
4. Be prepared for emergencies- Anaphylactic reactions caused by food allergies can be potentially life threatening. Individuals may need to carry and know how to use injectable epinephrine and an antihistamine to treat reactions due to accidental ingestion. Those with food allergies should also wear an identification bracelet that describes the allergy. If you have an anaphylactic reaction after eating a food, it is essential that you have someone take you to the emergency room, even if symptoms subside. For proper diagnosis and treatment, make sure to get follow-up care from an allergist.

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Source: Food Allergy Network (FAAN)  
[www.foodallergy.org](http://www.foodallergy.org)

The content of the handout is for informational purposes only. It is not intended to replace evaluation by a physician. If you have questions or medical concerns, please contact your allergist/immunologist.

## Food Allergy Resource

American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology  
611 East Wells Street  
Milwaukee, WI 53202  
Phone: 414-272-6071 or 800-822-2762  
<http://www.aaaai.org>

*General allergy information, referrals to Allergists*

American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology  
85 West Algonquin Road, Suite 550  
Arlington Heights, IL 60005  
Phone: 847-427-1200 or 800-842-7777  
<http://www.acaai.org>

*General allergy information, referrals to Allergists*

American School Food Service Association  
700 South Washington St., Suite 300  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
Phone: 703-739-3900 or 800-877-8822  
<http://www.asfsa.org>

*Guidance for managing food allergy in the school setting*

Food Allergy Network  
11781 Lee Jackson Highway, Suite 160  
Fairfax, VA 22033-3309  
Phone: 800-929-4040  
<http://www.foodallergy.org>

*Information for parents and consumers about food allergy, label reading, food preparation, management and education programs.*

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Grocery Manufacturers of America

2401 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20037

Phone: 202-337-9400

<http://www.gmabrands.com>

*Information about specific foods products and food allergens*

International food Information Council Foundation

1100 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 430

Washington, D.C. 20036

Phone: 202-296-6540

<http://www.ific.org>

*Scientific information about food and food ingredients, consumer and patient information about food allergy and asthma, information for food service personnel, referrals to scientific experts.*

National Food Processors Association

1350 I Street, NW, Suite 300

Washington, D.C. 20005

Phone: 202-639-5900

<http://www.nfpa-food.org>

*Scientific information about allergens and food processing.*

National Restaurant Association

1200 17<sup>th</sup> St., NW

Washington, D.C. 20036-3097

Phone: 202-331-5900

<http://www.restaurant.org>

*Guidance and training programs about food allergy for food service workers.*

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